

Rocky Mountain Spotted Fever (tickborne typhus fever)

What is Rocky Mountain spotted fever?

Rocky mountain spotted fever (RMSF) is a disease caused by a rickettsial organism. It is transmitted to humans by the bite of an infected American dog tick and frequently by other tick species.

Who gets RMSF?

In the eastern United States, children are infected most frequently, while in the western United States, adult males are the most likely to get the disease. The chance of getting RMSF is directly related to exposure to tick-infested habitats or to infested pets.

How is RMSF spread?

RMSF is spread by the bite of an infected tick (the American dog tick, the Lone-Star tick or the wood tick), or by contamination of the skin with tick blood or feces. It cannot be spread from one person to another.

What are the symptoms of RMSF?

RMSF is characterized by a sudden onset of moderate to high fever (which can last for 2 or 3 weeks), severe headache, fatigue, deep muscle pain, chills and rash. The rash begins on the legs or arms, may include the soles of the feet or palms of the hands and may spread rapidly to the trunk or rest of the body.

How soon do symptoms appear?

Symptoms usually appear within two weeks of the bite of an infected tick.

Does past infection with RMSF make a person immune?

Yes, a person who gets RMSF probably cannot get it again.

What is the treatment for RMSF?

Certain antibiotics such as tetracycline or chloramphenicol may be effective in treating the disease.

What can be done to prevent the spread of RMSF?

As much as possible, avoid areas where ticks are found, such as woods or fields with tall grass. When going into the woods or other places where ticks are common, wear light-colored long-sleeved shirts and long pants, and tuck your pant legs into your socks. If working or playing in a tick-infested area, watch for and remove any surface ticks, and look for ticks on the body every 3-4 hours. Tick repellents applied to legs and clothing may be helpful to prevent tick attachment. Be sure to follow label instructions before using any repellent. Tick populations may be controlled by applying pesticides to vegetation along trails and by mowing grass frequently in yards and outside fences.

How should a tick be removed?

Any attached ticks should be removed as soon as possible. To remove an attached tick,

grasp the tick with tweezers as close as possible to the skin where it is attached, and pull upward and out with a firm and steady pressure. If tweezers are not available, use fingers shielded with a cloth, tissue, or rubber gloves. Do not handle with bare hands. Be careful not to squeeze, crush or puncture the body of the tick because it may contain infectious fluids. After removing the tick, thoroughly disinfect the bite site and wash your hands. See or call a physician if you are concerned that the tick was not completely removed. If the tick is removed within 3 hours after attachment, the risk of tickborne infection is reduced.